

Introduction

Arizona Department of Education Mission

To serve Arizona's education community, ensuring every child has access to an excellent education.

The Exceptional Student Services Mission and Vision

The Exceptional Student Services (ESS) mission is to provide high quality service that builds capacity to improve outcomes for all students. The vision of ESS is that all students, including students with a disability, are well prepared for the next step, whether that is college, technical/trade school, career, job, or other means of engagement. To achieve this vision, ESS is establishing a system of supports that wraps around educators to improve student outcomes—academically, behaviorally, and functionally.

General Oversight and Supervision

States have a responsibility under federal law to have a system of general supervision. The purpose of having that system is to be able to monitor the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has identified eight components related to the system of general supervision: (1) State Systemic Improvement Plans; (2) Policies, Procedures, and Effective Implementation; (3) Integrated Monitoring Activities; (4) Fiscal Management; (5) Data on Processes and Results; (6) Improvement, Corrections, and Sanctions; (7) Effective Dispute Resolution; and (8) Targeted Technical Assistance and Professional Development.

In March 2012, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) announced that it would be taking steps to help close the achievement gap for students with disabilities by moving away from a one-size-fits-all, compliance-focused approach to a more balanced system that looks at how well students are being educated. The result of that impetus toward achievement is a new Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) system.

OSEP's vision for the Results-Driven Accountability system is that all components of accountability will be aligned in a manner that best supports States in improving results for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities, and their families.

RDA Seven Core Principles

- 1. Partnership with stakeholders*
- 2. Transparent and understandable to educators and families*
- 3. Drives improved results*
- 4. Protects children and families*
- 5. Differentiated incentives, supports, and interventions to States*
- 6. Encourages States to target resources and reduces burden*
- 7. Responsive to needs*

The Arizona Department of Education—Exceptional Student Services—general oversight and supervision is being aligned with these federal guidelines to balance IDEA compliance with improved student outcomes. Because OSEP is refocusing its accountability system to a balanced one, informed by student learning outcomes but still protecting the rights of children with disabilities and their families, Exceptional Student Services/Program Support and Monitoring has adopted a new system for monitoring called Examining Practices. This new monitoring system adheres to the RDA principles and supports local education agencies through examining each local education agency's (LEA) practices.

State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) / State-Identified Measurable Result (SIMR)

OSEP has included a new indicator in the State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report. This new indicator is called the **State Systemic Improvement Plan—the SSIP**. The SSIP is an ambitious but achievable multi-year plan that each State must write describing how the State will improve outcomes for children with disabilities served under IDEA. The SSIP replaces one of the indicators for both Part C (infants and toddlers), and Part B (children 3–21).

To develop this plan, ADE and Arizona stakeholders analyzed State- and LEA-level data. The data show that students with specific learning disabilities are the largest

population of special education students in Arizona, and these students are educated most of the day in the general education setting. Additionally, students with specific learning disabilities are the lowest performing disability category in reading on the State assessment. The implications of this data became the basis for the SSIP.

Although students with specific learning disabilities were the lowest performers in most schools within the State, ESS discovered that there were some schools in which these students had better outcomes. This led to a study of these higher performing schools. The results of this High-Performing Project (see below) provided additional information to consider as the ADE/ESS team narrowed down the SIMR possibilities.

Based on the review of all relevant data, Arizona has selected a SIMR that will focus on increasing the percentage of students passing the State reading assessment in grades 3–8 with specific learning disabilities in the FFY 2014 cohort of Focus and Pre-Intervention schools. (Focus and Pre-Intervention schools are two tiers of Title I schools identified by School Improvement and Intervention for support, professional development, and monitoring.)

Examining Data to Improve Student Achievement (EDISA), part of the current LEA monitoring system, guides LEAs in using a data-use framework with the focus on increasing reading achievement. The Examining Practices monitoring system is transitioning LEAs from the prior compliance-dominant monitoring system to one that allows LEAs to examine their systems and make changes that improve student outcomes. These practices support the SIMR by allowing the focus of monitoring to shift to a more balanced approach that will consider results, specifically the improvement of reading achievement. The State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) is a major focus of States' and OSEP's efforts to improve results for children with disabilities.

The High-Performing Project

In an effort to understand why some LEAs were able to increase the reading proficiency rate for students with disabilities members of Exceptional Student Services (ESS) reviewed the practices of selected LEAs. The LEAs chosen were representative of the many types of LEAs found in Arizona—urban and rural, large and small, district and charter. These LEAs had substantially higher proficiency rates for their students with disabilities than the state average and also had a good cross-sampling of disability categories. Each site was visited and the leadership team for the LEA was interviewed. Data from the visits were analyzed to reveal the following trends:

1. A culture of high expectations for ALL students and a student-first mentality
2. Highly effective teaching strategies in the general education classroom
3. Frequent data collection for use in decision making
4. The use of data analysis to provide interventions and enrichment
5. Core instruction in the general education classroom as much as possible
6. Effective leadership

A Culture of High Expectations for ALL Students and a Student-First Mentality

A common theme across each charter and district visited was a student-first mentality and the belief that all children, with the right support from teachers, can achieve academically. School leaders, general education teachers, special education teachers, and other staff spoke of “our kids,” not “their kids,” when discussing high expectations for students with disabilities. This collegial team mentality created a strong system of support between general education and special education teachers, and this support left little room for excuses for teachers not prepared to instruct children assigned to their classrooms; students first was an accepted and nonnegotiable construct. Special education was seen as a service children receive, not a place they go or a label identifying them.

Highly Effective Teaching Strategies in the General Education Classroom

Because the majority of Arizona students with disabilities spend at least 80% of the time in the general education classroom, instruction in the general education

classroom must be effective and based on research. In the LEAs studied, instruction was intentional and purposeful, with lesson plans and activities written in advance and based on data that could continually advance students to mastery of concepts and skills taught. Students were not just “receiving” an education; they were actively pursuing and participating in it. Standards-based grade-level instruction with modifications and accommodations as needed was provided in each classroom, but was continuously linked to the rigor and content described in the grade-level standards. Class time was considered sacred, with minimal disruptions occurring when class was in session.

Frequent Data Collection for Use in Decision Making

Within the LEAs visited, data-based decision making was essential to the success of all students. Continually using data allowed staff to monitor student progress and flexibly group students accordingly, depending on student strengths and weaknesses. These groupings of all students (both with and without IEPs) could constantly change, depending on the data, so that each child could get the supports needed to master content and move on to new learning.

The Use of Data Analysis to Provide Interventions and Enrichment

Each district or charter visited had some mechanism or time for ability-based groupings in order for students to reach mastery in reading and mathematics. This varied from system to system. In some cases, it was a time of day during which students were regrouped based on data and sent to different teachers depending on the intervention/enrichment activity; in some situations, time was built into the lesson plan and the teacher and co-teacher, or teacher and paraprofessional, worked with students in the same classroom. The intervention and enrichment opportunities were targeted toward specific skills needed to master a lesson or based on individual needs for learning, not just on participation in the activity.

Core Instruction in the General Education Classroom as Much as Possible

At each high-performing district and charter visited, LEAs attempted to ensure that all students received their core instruction in the general education classroom. Any deviation from this was based on strong data and decided by the IEP team. Special education supports consisted of more “push-in” services, with the special education teacher joining the general education classroom, than “pull-out” services, with the child being removed from the class to receive special education services. In most cases, when pull-out services did occur, they were strategically scheduled. Strategic scheduling meant that to the maximum extent possible, services did not occur during core instruction. Interference with core instruction was considered harmful and kept to a minimum.

Effective Leadership

The LEA leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals, special education directors, and lead teachers) were essential in ensuring all the foundational beliefs that are a part of the performance-improvement trends were taking place. In most cases, the principals were “in the trenches,” visiting classrooms regularly and participating in the data meetings regarding all students, including those with disabilities. Often, the school’s leadership was consistent, with many leaders remaining at the district or school for years, and many promotions and hirings coming from within the system. The tone and expectation set by the leaders included the mantra of “these are all our students.”